

JANUARY 19, 1978

Two weeks ago, the San Angelo newspaper features pictures of a golden eagle killing a baby lamb. These shots were thought to be the first taken of actual eagle predation. Sheep and goat herders' associations and bird watching groups had been arguing for years over the subject. Sheep and goat herders, in the meantime, had been taking plenty of losses from eagles while the conferences ranged in various statehouses and in the nation's capitol.

In the written portion of the issue, an Audubon Society leader commented that the pictures did not change their position. The society, the article said, contended that eagles only prey on weak and orphaned lambs and goats.

I sure disagree with that idea. My family has been raising sheep for over 70 years. Eagles never were plentiful enough to eat all the dogie lambs that were raised on this ranch alone, much less the whole Shortgrass country. The article admitted that somewhere from 20-40 thousand golden eagles ranged into the United States. I can tell them for sure that last fall, we'd have foundered and grounded the whole population out here.

Markets were glutted with light lambs. Triple desk trucks were hauling 600 head at a load. Truckers were so swamped moving the herds of balls of wool and hide that the head travel agent with the Chase Manhattan Bank couldn't have reserved a bobtail.

No city-based birdwatcher is going to convince me that the eagles were eating up the dogie lambs. We had a trap here in front of the house so full of them that the broom weeds were tinged in wool. Any eagle that had tried to eat those dehydrated peewees would have had to had his craw washed out by a veterinarian and be put on a steady course of oral irrigation.

Saying that eagles kill only the weaker animals improves our argument. I say that the only coyotes and eagles that we eliminate are the dumb heads.

It helps a species to cull them. One time at the ranch a bird dog knocked over seven of our eight guinea hens. The sole survivor was so smart she could have nested in the middle of the biggest bird dog kennel in the South. She was so tough that she overhauled a chicken-killing polecat's back running gear so thorough his musk glands ruptures his spray nozzle.

A big disappointment of my life was not breeding her to a specially selected cock. I'd have raised a line of fighting guineas that would have filled the pits with blood and feathers. Nobody would think about betting against a guinea on any proposition except being a noisemaker. She sure was a fighter, that old girl was, but I guess if she'd laid any eggs, she would have eaten them.

Instead of carrying on an argument about the golden eagle's diet, folks had better start thinking where their own food is going to come from. We are lucky that debating and lawmaking don't despoil nature. The story of the guinea hen may turn out to be a parable in the future.